



The Postmodern Text: Answer to the Problem of Meaning

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T.S. Eliot writes in his essay titled “The Metaphysical Poets” that the ideal kind of poet, which he calls the “intellectual” poet must “dislocate” the language from the meaning. What an odd choice of words! This divorce of language from meaning was practically unheard of since metaphysical poetry was violently removed from the waking memory of the English literary readership, thanks to Dr. Johnson’s polemical remarks on its inauthenticity. However, it sufficiently outlines the general principle of expression that Eliot’s intellectual class of modern poets followed in the years to come. With publication of *The Waste Land* and Joyce’s *Ulysses*, a certain class of readers began to whet their appetite for the wave of unsavoury ambiguity of fragmented poetry, while the Anglo-American circle of New Criticism was already prepared for the birth of a new study into the untapped source of pure formalistic lyric. It would not be wrong to say at this point that literature was going under some unprecedented changes, and rightly so, for the reason that ‘meaning’ as the core of linguistic expression was suddenly, if I could use Eliot’s words, under dislocation.

As substantiated by the efforts of modern artists, language and meaning have a peculiarly intrinsic relationship with the individual and the self, the postmodern author/reader explores this correlation with a clear cognizance of the role of metaphysics, in the dark abyss that lies between the unknowable and the ‘seemingly’ knowable. In other words, the modernists’ endeavour to dislocate language from meaning becomes the endless deference of ‘Meaning’ to meanings yet unknown. If one was to invoke Deleuze here, it would be fairly appropriate to devise a fundamental purpose of postmodernist endeavour, that a subjectivity thus attained (since everything is textual and linguistically determined, but not in the naive sense) must be unique and genuine, as its potentiality arises from a self-protrusion of virtuality from existing semiotic units. Therefore, in the coming sections an attempt has been made to demonstrate the linguistic nature of consciousness (as first declared by Jacques Lacan) through the analogous

field of phenomenology. Using the same finding as a premise and a guideline, it is shown how postmodernist texts (e.g. *Sexing the Cherry*) deconstruct human subjectivity through the text. The paper contrasts Modernist trends of fiction with Postmodernist ones since postmodernism derives its function of deconstruction from the Modernist's structuralist point of view. Furthermore, this contrast will establish a forking of path between earlier structuralist philosophy that was still metaphysical (early 20th c.) and post-phenomenology philosophy that overlaps Poststructuralism.¹

Upon comparison, one assumption stays with critics of Hermeneutics (or the more widely associated umbrella term, Liberal Humanists) & phenomenologists such as Edmund Husserl and early Martin Heidegger, that is, the self is out there somewhere either in the community entirely or beyond physical reality. They always imagined the truthful identity to be cemented in either of these spaces and that it can be achieved either through a bipartisan dissection of text or through its annihilation. For example, Levi-Strauss' concept of 'bricolage' as Derrida clarifies (in his speech *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*) must come from an internal acceptance of a perfect 'engineer,' not realising that the latter is creation of the former.² Another important concept that will be analysed in detail in this paper is Heidegger's concept of *Dasein*. But Sartre's work undercuts this significance of binary. Sartre re-defines interpretation based on his two fundamental claims that consciousness "...is always of something but in itself is not something" (Gutting 860). This self-awareness and alienation of the consciousness is called self-consciousness. This self-consciousness sees the embodied 'self' as the other and experiences itself as "nothing" (Sartre). Since consciousness is "immaterial" and "transparent" it cannot possibly grasp things as "being-in-itself" existent in reality but only "as" something (Gutting 861). Here, consciousness is concerned not with the objects as themselves but the meaning that they impart. Heidegger's idea of *Being*

¹In his speech *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*, Derrida implicates Levi-Strauss as a structuralist for imposing a metaphysical intent in his work on myths. Similarly, a possible group of thinkers could be identified with New Criticism, German Idealism, Semiotics, and Semiology. On the other hand, thinkers working to expand that philosophy deviated considerably from and denied any place to metaphysics, could be called poststructuralists, e.g., Foucault, Derrida, Sartre, and probably even Wittgenstein.

²"The notion of the engineer who had supposedly broken with all forms of *bricolage* is therefore a theological idea; and since Levi-Strauss tells us elsewhere that *bricolage* is mythopoetic, the odds are that the engineer is a myth produced by the *bricoleur*." -ibid

(Sein) is similar to Sartre's idea of object as being-in-itself which Sartre displaces with the meaning of the object that consciousness conceives, independent of the object's virtue of being.³

This relation between virtual object and the consciousness which Sartre describes is that of utmost significance in the attempt to understand the peculiar similarities between language and consciousness. He explains the relation between the objects in themselves and consciousness as that of negation. Since the defining property of consciousness is self-consciousness, it can be aware of objects as distinct from other objects and distinct from itself. This is also the two step function of the reader's consciousness through which the otherness of the text is first recognised and then deferred endlessly to other meanings. In other words, there is extraction and then abstraction in the conceptualisation of the text for the purpose of understanding which, in effect, surpasses all barriers of signification. Therefore consciousness is at complete freedom to choose whichever meaning the text arrives at with sufficient assignation. This shift from signification to assignation highlights a paradigm shift in the way we interpret the text which the postmodern text seems to apply.

Consciousness while interpreting, immediately arrives at a certain stage where it fails to signify any meaning to the object it is perceiving. This is the notion of nihilation: an immediate perception of nothingness that lies in the mirage of signifiers. There is no direct relation between the consciousness and the object because a veil of signification hangs between them. Nihilation can then be understood as the gap between the world and the consciousness which language attempts to fill. But as language itself is symbolic, it suggests that consciousness due to its alienation from the objects fails in its duty to truly signify meaning. So Sartre's sense of negation in the interpretation of objects attempts to bring forth the semantic idea of absurdity between signifier and signified where the realm of meanings eliminates the existence of an ideal meaning.

³Heidegger suggests that there are 'modes' of Being that are conditioned a priori, while Sartre utilizes this understanding to suggest that these modes of existence are based on intentionality.

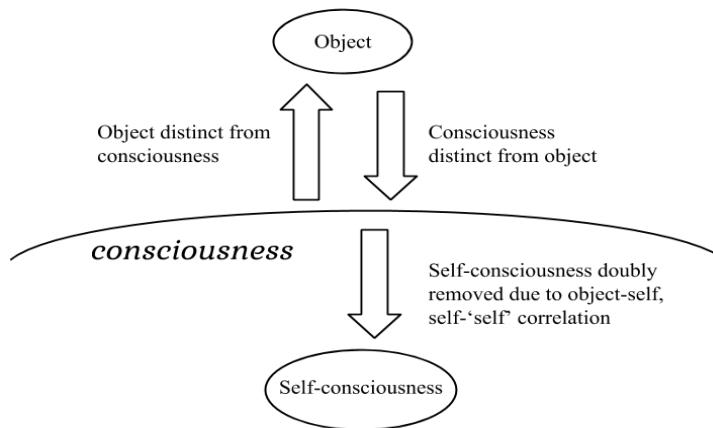


Fig. 1: Model of ‘Self-consciousness’ (Source: Self-created)

Sartre’s ideas on consciousness are quite clearly in response to his predecessors. His idea of the ‘self’ as an ephemeral being is in contrast to Husserl’s idea of the ‘pure’ self: the former being a virtual incidental shadow whereas the latter is a concrete presence. When Sartre describes that there is a wide gap between the world and the self, he seems to be proposing that the self is not absolute but is rather relational in the sense that it can only know itself as different from others. So, when a being interprets objects in correlation, it is virtually projecting itself behind the ‘self.’ It reveals that even the ‘self’ is a construction in language that is always under process of assignation. Existentialism is the final outcome of his theory on interpretation which proposes that a clear definite identity cannot be arrived at because the being and its relation with the world denies any stagnant meaning, therefore, all choices are considerable because they are equally true. This idea of complete freedom can then be applied to create a subversively new kind of textual language that encourages discourses on several horizontal levels and more characteristically on meta levels.

This paper attempts to locate the postmodern text at the intersection of Derrida’s Deconstruction and Sartre’s Existentialism. The task of Modernist criticism and the entire enterprise of Hermeneutics & New Criticism was to unify the text, even going as far as considering anachronistic knowledge.⁴ On the contrary, postmodern approach attempts to deconstruct the text in order to raise questions on concrete subjectivity. It uses the principles of post-structuralism to destroy

⁴Cf. Wimsatt & Beardsley’s footnote: “And the history of words after a poem is written may contribute meanings which if relevant to the original pattern should not be ruled out by a scruple about intention.” (‘The Intentional Fallacy’)

mega-narrative in favour of meta-narrative. It also goes a little further than earlier forms of text by bringing a sociological aspect of art into its idealistic beauty. This is because a postmodern artist understands the influence that work of art has on a reader's consciousness; with the profound understanding of how consciousness perceives objects as devoid of essence, such text proposes the significance of a discourse on all discourses. It is quite understandable that if language has an effectual relationship on both conscious and unconscious level of understanding then the text must be re-shaped in an unbiased narrative in order to provide a formative means for the collective consciousness of society as a whole. In such a community of people, the marginalised and the misrepresented will find new definitions and will finally control their own narratives.

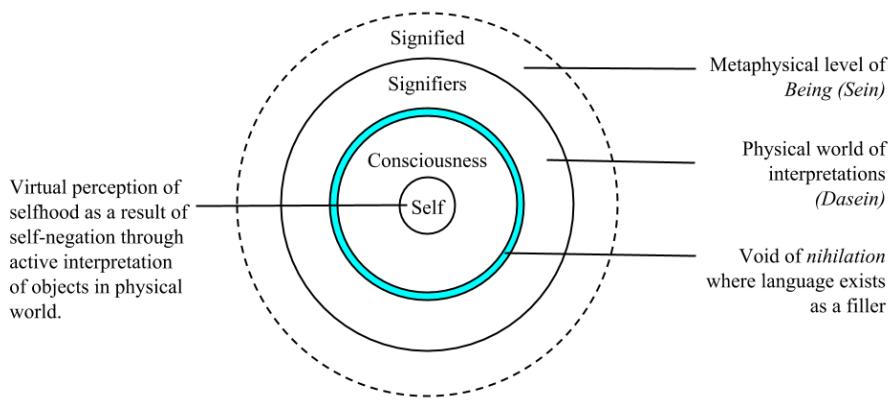


Fig. 2: Model of 'Interpretation' (Source: Self-created)

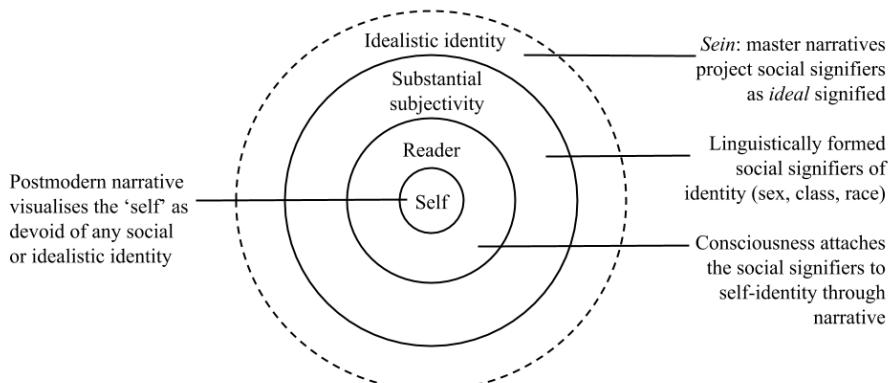


Fig. 3: Model of 'Text' (Source: Self-created)

As shown in Fig. 3, similar to the self-conscious mind, the reader's consciousness in the reading process seems to act as the centre. The prejudiced reader then attempts to bridge the gap between itself and the virtual sphere of stereotypical subjectivity through a pre-intentional reading of the text. A conventional text falls prey to such a reading in general because either the politics of language is misunderstood or the conventional narrative itself binds its characters into substantial subjectivity. A postmodern text on the other hand, defamiliarises the characters from the substantial subjectivity and also, as a counter measure, opens up the narrative; in both the cases, the author takes the command from the reader and gives it back to the characters. In this way, the individuality of the substantiated subjectivity replaces the reader as the centre of the text.

Endowed with the knowledge that language is limited to functioning only in the gap between the known and the unknowable, where even the known (consciously assumable) is actually not knowable, a text can basically surpass any meaning that seems to define it. The narrative and its characters can therefore be unbounded and go undefined. As Jeanette Winterson shows in the epigraph to her novel, *Sexing the Cherry*, the concept of 'time' seems to act as a placeholder for the centre around which language structures itself. Likewise the most human part of a text, the characters, who must be unbounded always seem to follow the linearity of time and evolve in one direction alone. For example, in a text as modern and subversive as *Mrs. Dalloway*, time is very much divided into subjective and objective. Though the characters prefer to live in their own sense of time and space, characterised by their memories, objective time like the bell of Big Ben clock or the larger marker of a passing day seems to hark them back to reality. A text like *Sexing the Cherry* utilises a similar theory of time relativism in a whole new way to give the command of narrative back to the characters. Winterson does so by giving her characters the gift of quantum entanglement, where the objective line of time fuses with the subjective time according to the wishes of the characters and, most importantly, provides the characters to view their own infinite narratives on every instant of time. This is the linguistic technique of shifting the centre back to the character. But it can also be found upon close inspection, and through the lens of Sartre's Existentialism, that the ephemeral self remains at the centre which is virtually projected outward through the symbolic function of language. We have seen how language and the text in particular exist between the consciousness and the world of objects in order to act as a positive force in the negative presence of nihilation.

Sexing the Cherry, as opposed to the ideologically nostalgic modernist texts, has no qualms ‘playing’ with social signifiers such as sexuality, gender, race, and even time, and succeeds wonderfully in showing that these perceived objectivities are the result of relative autonomy of reality as an untouchable tradition. The characters can jump between time perceptual realities as easily as going through a door. As Jordan says, “I resolved to set a watch on myself...trying to catch myself disappearing through a door just noticed in the wall” (2). This time-dissociative existence allows Jordan to perceive objective timeline, which is linear, as something that is external to him and he is not subjected to its tyranny. In an act of subversion, it is he who keeps watch over time and all the possible timelines in which his own self resides: “Every journey conceals another journey within its lines: the path not taken and the forgotten angle. These are journeys I wish to record. Not the ones I made, but the one I might have made, or perhaps did make in some other place or time” (2). *Sexing the Cherry* reverses the overall time-space contingency of a text by opening the linear timeline into multidimensional progression and it does so by joining the two usually distinct points of narration in the text whereby the sense of progression self-destructs. The first chapter of the text is narrated by Jordan where he mentions a vivid experience, “I began to walk with my hands outstretched in front of me...in this way, for the first time, I traced the lineaments of my own opposite me” (1–2). Interestingly, this exact event is mentioned in the penultimate chapter, where the Dog-woman notices Jordan doing the same, “He came to, and feeling his way, arms outstretched he had suddenly touched a face...he saw that the stranger was himself.” The narrative has come to a full circle, culminating in a resolution for Jordan where he finally feels his belongingness with the first person who laid upon him and loved him.⁵ The Dog-woman also learns to love herself by seeing through the eyes of her son and they both seem to have re-discovered their place in the infinite time and space, which is to be ‘anywhere’ together. Thus, the metaphysics of such a postmodern text suggests that a story need not be bound by any constraints and shows this awareness in a kind of narrative where the characters not only are free from tyranny of time but the text itself eludes any linearity by adapting a circular narrative structure and is also fragmented—divided into irreducible subjective experiences making each chapter a narrative in itself.

⁵In the first chapter of the book, Jordan contrasts the selfless love of his mother with his own desires to flee by comparing himself to “a jealous father.” It is not surprising to find this polarity of belongingness in Jordan because he has never known a father’s love and all his ideas about love center around the Dog-Woman.

The previous paragraph showed how the centre of narrative time is transposed to characters by manipulating objective time. However, there exists another centre that seems to be rigid and into the social-textual interaction zone. This represents the various vague but principled ideas of identity boundaries that are affixed in the collective unconscious. These are orientations which an individual seemingly borrows from community through language such as sex, class, gender, race, caste, etc. *Sexing the Cherry* gives its characters complete agency by handing over the reins of the narrative through annihilation of objectivity; however, it does not lose the sight of the substantial subjectivity of these characters. Jeanette Winterson attempts to transgress these boundaries by defamiliarisation of the characters by completely dissociating them from their stereotypes and creating a subjectivity on its own terms. Winterson seems to understand the importance of a reader in the formation of a textual subjectivity of its characters. In this way, Jordan and Dog-Woman are as much an authorial imagination as the reader's contextual imagination allows.

Therefore, it becomes the responsibility of the author to provide the text with a kind of language that determines the subjectivity of its characters. And in a postmodern text, the language takes a life of its own in order to give life to its characters. The language of *Sexing the Cherry* does this perfectly well by its use of deconstructive language in an attempt to evade any subjugation of its characters. The body of the Dog-Woman and its descriptions almost resemble a metaphysical conceit in its defamiliarisation. Due to a constant play of metaphors the perceived subjectivity is continually re-formed in the reader's mind. It uncovers the prejudices and stereotypes of the 'factual' narrative of pre-Reformation era in England, and as Jordan says, *Sexing the Cherry* shows the lives that are written "invisibly" and are marginalised due to the 'facts' of life which impose a certain subjectivity upon them, may it be literature or the reality construed in language, that polarises such beings into binaries of stereotype.

In this way, a similar unravelling of the individual self-consciousness is done both in Existentialism and a postmodern narrative pointing to the fact that language reflects the structure of human consciousness and therefore the idea of the self is neither fixed in essence nor found in community but is continually re-formed through our linguistic interaction with the collective consciousness of society.



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